

St. Christopher Catholic Elementary School

Sudbury Catholic District School Board Sudbury, Ontario

CONTACT INFORMATION

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About the school ...

St. Christopher is a Kindergarten to Grade 6 school in Sudbury, northern Ontario's largest city and a major centre for the Canadian nickel industry. The school sits on the outskirts of town, busing in all of its 175 students from as far as 50 to 75 kilometres away. St. Christopher has 9.4 teachers (equivalent full time).

Neither distance nor sharing their principal with another outlying school lessens this school's sense of community or energy around student learning. "This is a staff that really depends on each other with a strong feeling of purposeful, professional collegiality," observes the area superintendent. Even though students may come from a large geographical area, they have a strong sense of cohesiveness, facilitating a whole-school approach to all elements of learning. When concerns arise, the principal hosts a focus group where students share their thoughts, brainstorm solutions and collectively commit to an action plan. Parental involvement in the school community is similarly strong. One in four families is involved in the school, creating a very active Catholic School Community Council and generating a large volunteer base.

Some Snapshots

Students ...

- help to develop anchor charts and provide input into assessments through the use of portfolios and student conferencing
- give input via student questionnaires into various aspects of school life
- are recognized individually in an annual celebration for their unique talents and contributions to the school community

Parents ...

- are involved in monthly meetings of Catholic School Community Council where they contribute to the School Self-Assessment (School Effectiveness Framework), the School Improvement Plan and EQAO data
- enjoy school newsletters, which include TIPS for parents and how they can help their children at home

"We've always had a great community," said one teacher, "now we're zeroing in on student achievement," noting that "in our third year of doing weekly running records, our scores have really improved!" The school also has a significant focus on character development, which means integrating the Gospel values into every aspect of the curriculum.

Ongoing improvement ...

The steady and significant increase in Grade 6 EQAO assessments over the last three years has resulted in very high levels of student achievement. Eighty-seven per cent of Grade 6 students met or exceeded the provincial standard in mathematics and writing, while 96 per cent of students met the provincial standard in reading. In the Grade 3 assessments, students have sustained their previous levels of achievement. The results confirm the benefits of the school's focus on student learning and achievement.

Success after struggle ...

The St. Christopher school community believes that all students can learn, a conviction based on faith in each child's potential and founded in evidence that with the appropriate time and support all children can experience success. For St. Christopher, committing to "All students can learn" led to adopting a case study intervention model. This commitment created some stressful demands on the principal's time (his other school is 100 kilometres away!), but the small school size and its strong sense of community compensated, enabling the principal and staff to keep a singular focus on how to make the intervention model work. They analyze each student on an individual basis and create a learning plan for each child in the school.

Teaching, learning and leading ...

Comprehensive literacy. St. Christopher has implemented large blocks of uninterrupted literacy time across the school. In their literacy blocks, teachers use a gradual release of responsibility model, first modelling skills and practices and then "releasing" students to engage in small-group and independent work. In all classrooms, teachers ask strategic questions to spark higher-order thinking and use mentor texts and anchor charts to support students as they apply their learning. Resource teachers work with groups of students to support regular classroom instruction. Web-based teaching tools are used in the Junior division.

Comprehensive numeracy. St. Christopher has implemented the three-part problem-solving lesson in 60-minute time blocks. All classrooms use PRIME math as a diagnostic tool, manipulatives to help students problem-solve and Bansho to annotate student learning.

Use of data. Staff members work collaboratively to analyze EQAO data and set targets based on the Board Improvement Plan. The principal works one to one with all staff at all levels for all learners. He meets with each classroom teacher in September and after each reporting period to collect data about students who are achieving below provincial standard, identify at-risk students and develop plans to address the needs of special education students. Sources of data include EQAO, Paradigm Plus, DRA, CASI, PRIME MATH and report cards. The staff sets targets and plans the intervention strategies necessary to meet the established targets. Parents are consulted regularly for input into their children's Individual Learning Plans.



Leadership in the school community. St. Christopher's principal supports every teacher as a leader. The School Improvement Team consists of the entire staff and all teachers are committed to improvements in student learning and achievement. Mentoring is a regular part of the relationships between experienced teachers and newer teachers. "We're one piece in a large wheel," says the principal. "We want to share and learn from a larger learning community" – an approach that leads to extensive networking with schools across the board and region.

[Talking about a new student who was having some adjustment issues], "I can't wait for the spirit of St. Christopher to get in his heart." *Student*

"My children know that I am involved in their school and they know how important I think their education is." *Parent*

"Teachers expect that certain things should be happening at home, and they outline these expectations clearly to us. We appreciate their suggested ways of extending learning at home." *Parent*

"You can join us in our staff room on Fridays after school where we're enjoying a 'weekly review' about our students and their learning." *Teacher*

"Student learning is the goal, not student grading – we're not measuring a deficit, we're striving to improve student learning." *Principal*

Moving into the future

- ◆ learn more about teaching-learning pathways and teacher moderation
- ◆ increase emphasis on specific math strategies and embed numeracy charts into daily instructional practice
- ◆ continue our practice of involving parents in curriculum-related discussions (moving beyond traditional fundraising activities)
- ◆ celebrate our successes as a School on the Move, visit neighbouring boards with Schools on the Move, set up protocols to welcome visitors – and learn from them

St. Christopher Catholic Elementary School

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About the school ...

St. Christopher is a JK to Grade 8 Catholic school, located in a middle-class community in central Windsor, a city in southwestern Ontario on the American border closely tied to the auto industry. The school has a population of about 550 students. A recent renovation, adding 13 classrooms, administrative offices, a staff room and a modern resource centre with a computer networked lab, has greatly improved St. Christopher's appearance and technological capacity, creating a bright, state-of-the-art learning environment.

The school motto at St. Christopher is "Soar Like an Eagle." All children are encouraged to try their best and to reach their full potential. Each year, the staff identify three school goals, two academic and one character goal, as part of the School Improvement Plan. The task then for the staff is to work diligently to meet these goals. As one teacher said, "There's no mistaking when you walk into our school what our goals are!" The school hallways are a celebration of student work, talents and interests, as is the school website, which features "hot news" student-made video clips. Parents, students and staff are proud of the school and are determined to support its continuing growth and achievement.

Some Snapshots

Students ...

- participate in dance, drama, choir, chess and all the major sports
- lead "Spirit Days," bringing students of all ages together to celebrate character and academic achievements
- create online videos, including award-winning "Pourquoi-Take-French" (posted on TeacherTube)

Parents ...

- support annual "Celebrity Read-a-Thon" (with police officers, elected officials, local hockey players, TV/radio celebrities and many others), the 100 Book Challenge and Parents as Partners in Reading programs
- work with a very active School Council to keep up to date about what is happening at the school
- are strong in their appreciation of the work the teachers and principals are doing, the support the board is offering and the commitment of the entire system to student growth and parent engagement

Ongoing improvement ...

Significant increases in EQAO results over the past three years have led to higher levels of student achievement in all six assessments. The highest result three years ago was 56 per cent of students meeting or exceeding the provincial standard in Grade 3 reading. In the 2007-08 EQAO assessments, between 71 and 74 per cent of students achieved at or above the provincial standard in five assessment areas. This improvement reflects the commitment to increasing student learning and achievement.

Success after struggle ...

The administrators and teachers at St. Christopher describe their Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership experience as the impetus for reflection, self-assessment and redirection. They openly acknowledge the early challenges associated with change. In the words of one teacher, "Collaboration is not easy. There's a lot of give and take. You have to work at it." In the initial stages, they found it difficult to articulate beliefs about teaching and learning, to build new relationships on a professional as well as personal level, and to support one another to overcome reluctance to change. Teachers had to work at relinquishing resources housed in their

individual classrooms in order to create a shared bookroom. But they persevered through the challenges, taking one step at a time.

Staff began by redefining the school's mission so that the prime focus was on student learning, success and achievement and evolving to a results-oriented school improvement plan. The motivation to continue came from the positive and measurable impact on student learning and achievement.

Among the components that were, and remain, crucial to student success are:

- **Goal setting:** This exercise unified the staff to focus on three SMART goals (two academic and one on character) and to work diligently to achieve them. Monthly tracking of each goal enables each staff member to be accountable for student success.
- **Collaboration time:** Daily shared prep time for grade-level partners is now part of the school's organization as is additional once-monthly collaboration time provided by the administration team. Staff members are encouraged to take risks, open their classroom doors and contribute to professional dialogue and learning.
- **Principal visibility:** Daily "drop-ins" to classrooms provide the principal with the opportunity to validate good practices, reflect on effective instructional strategies and observe improved student work – and to share with staff the evidence of what was working well.

Teaching, learning and leading ...

Literacy and numeracy blocks. At the board level, a number of specific strategies for improvement were identified, among them uninterrupted blocks of time for literacy and numeracy instruction. At St. Christopher, this was one of the most powerful board-identified strategies – 100 minutes for literacy and 60 minutes for numeracy. Professional learning sessions helped teachers organize and deliver balanced instruction in learning blocks to maximize student learning. Changes were made to the school day to minimize interruptions.

Formal and informal assessment. The school's SMART goals are based on assessment data that identify student needs. Then, student results are analyzed on a continuous basis to monitor success in achieving these goals. Teachers take responsibility for the data walls for Primary and Junior grades to measure student progress and then use the data to plan instruction.



School-wide emphasis on non-fiction. The emphasis on non-fiction reading and writing, a "number-one factor" associated with improved student achievement, is described in detail as a SMART goal in the school improvement plan. The school introduced this focus by purchasing professional resources for staff and engaging materials for students. Professional development sessions (including in-school sessions) have assisted teachers in sharing and honing the strategies and practices they will employ to provide the most effective instruction.

Teacher leaders. Teachers, support and system-level staff, and parents describe the principal and vice principal as strong, highly capable and enthusiastic leaders. They emphasize that the administrators provide clear direction, relevant data, support for focused learning and action, resources and encouragement, modelling what they expect and closely monitoring the implementation and impact of the school improvement plan. Within a culture that values collaboration and capacity building, many teacher leaders are coming forward to share their expertise with classroom partners and colleagues. As one teacher explained "Every teacher has something to offer."

"They focus on what it is that will make each child shine. There's a trust here. It's a family." *Parent*

"We work as a team – and that's how we get things done." *Parent*

"No one person can do it all. We need to work together." *Teacher*

"Data help us focus collectively on student needs." *Teacher*

Moving into the future

- ◆ explore teacher moderation in more detail across all grade levels
- ◆ learn how to use purposeful talk and PLCs more effectively in both literacy and numeracy and network with other teachers to support student learning
- ◆ build on the current level of parent engagement to make it more effective
- ◆ share ideas to continue to enhance writing instruction
- ◆ investigate additional opportunities for teacher collaboration, team teaching and visiting each other's classrooms